Talk To Me

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Talk To Me

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Summary

Bruce and Tim have a long-overdue heart-to-heart

Notes

In other words;

What if Bruce took laxatives for his emotional constipation?

Title: Cavetown's Talk to Me

See the end of the work for more notes

The burger joint was dark and semi-crowded, the murmur of people overpowering the rock music playing from the speakers above the bar. The smell of fried meat and spices hung thickly in the warm air, the distant sizzling and clanking from the kitchen occasionally echoing out into the dining hall. Heavy raindrops tapped loudly against the large windows. The view of the drenched street of Gotham City blurred in the steady stream of water that trickled down from above, and the warmth and humidity of the restaurant clouded the edges of the window with condensation.

A smiley had already been drawn into the mist. A droplet escaped one of its eyes, giving the impression that it was crying with its too-wide smile still plastered onto its face. Its creator sat just beside it in a dark booth, a large hamburger gripped in his hands.

Tim bit into his lunch, leaning over the plate to avoid getting any sauce on his shirt. He tried to ignore the fact that Bruce, who was sitting across from him, had once again fallen silent.

Bruce's eyes were drawn to something on the other side of the misty window, brows furrowed in thought. The light from outside made him look unnaturally pale, the glow from the ceiling bathing his hair in a contrasting warm, orange glow.

He was dressed in a blue, woolen sweater Tim recalled gifting him a few Christmases back. It was looser around his shoulders now than it had been then; well-worn.

Tim leaned back in his seat, uncertainty simmering in his stomach.

Almost six weeks had passed since Bruce's return. Throughout the whole period, Tim hadn't fully believed that the man was actually back.

The traces of his unwanted exploit through time were still there, visible in the slight hollowness of his cheeks, the sharpness of his cheekbones, the occasional far-away gaze that he seemed to be fighting off once in a while, blinking rapidly as if to clear his vision.

He'd cut his hair since Tim last saw him. Tim had only caught a quick glance of the man's form under the pile of blankets and wires at the hospital, but from what Tim had heard from the others – *the others*

being practically everyone on the Justice League – Bruce had been close to *desperate* to get rid of the shoulder-length hair that he'd grown out during his seven-month absence.

His hair was longer than before, enough to allow the unexpected waves to frame his face. And even though Tim's hair was straighter and he sported a semi-visible undercut, he'd already gotten a handful of remarks about his and Bruce's resemblance. Annoyingly enough, Superman had been the first to make such a comment. The worst part was that it hadn't been said with any ill contempt. If the careful smile he'd offered Tim was anything to go by, he'd seemed almost *nervous.*

Tim wasn't sure whether it made him dislike him even more or be persuaded to give the alien a second chance. Then he'd remembered presenting his theory of Bruce's whereabouts to the League, the pitying looks that had followed him out the room, and he immediately didn't feel as bad about throwing all his Super-merch in the dumpster.

Still, he knew he couldn't be mad at him - or the League for that matter - forever. After all, they were the reason Bruce had survived. Thanks to them, he'd gotten one more chance to talk to Bruce, to hear his voice, to *hug* him again. And that first hug had been…Well. Tim had probably broken *hundreds* of violations when he'd crawled into Bruce's hospital bed, had probably embarrassed himself for *life* when he, as felt Bruce's weak arms wrap around him, promptly burst out crying in front of the whole League team.

It was the first time he'd openly cried in front of anyone in years. The absolutely first time he'd cried in front of *Bruce.* And despite practically being on his deathbed, the man had looked terrified until Tim had managed to choke out between heaving sobs that *no*, he was neither injured nor dosed with any harmful toxins. He was just...so *relieved*.

After that, Bruce had let Tim cry himself to sleep against his probably bruised, probably aching-to-all-hell chest.

Ever since that night, things had been…well, *strange* was probably the best way to put it. Tim hadn't seen Bruce since, had kept his distance from the sheer mortification of it all. He *had* gotten more calls from Bruce in a week than he'd gotten in an entire month, though. And all they'd do was…talk. Sometimes it was for a few minutes, other times for nearly half an hour. One time they'd talked non-stop for *one hour*. The topics had been about everything and nothing, making occasional jokes and talking shit about annoying clients and complaining about

Galas. It had been…nice. Strange, but nice.

That was right until, a few days ago, Bruce had asked him if he wanted to grab lunch together. On a Sunday. And Tim realized that he'd gotten it all wrong. Maybe Bruce *wasn't* doing better. Maybe there had been complications with his return, and Bruce was dying. Tim had been kept out of the loop more times than he could count. He wouldn't put it past the others to do it again.

Despite the nauseating fear of that thought, Tim had arrived at the diner half an hour early, hands almost shaking with badly-veiled anxiety, only to find that Bruce was already waiting for him in one of the booths lining the windows.

The moment Bruce's eyes found him, his face had brightened, a hand lifting from the table in greeting. Then his expression had shifted, hand gesture faltering. Tim watched frozen as he'd then slid out of the booth. Leaning heavily on his cane, he'd limped toward him.

When he'd made it over, Bruce greeted him with a gentle *'hi,'*. And then Tim had been unable to quell his noise of surprise when Bruce had, without warning, pulled him into a hug. And sure, even before the whole *hospital bed incident*, Bruce had hugged Tim. They'd been rare and brief but and gentle, lasting a quick breath or two. Practical, not time-consuming.

This hug, however, had lasted for what felt like an eternity. Even though Bruce only had one arm available, Tim had felt like he'd been swallowed whole, like he was being suffocated as the arm tightened even further around him. And despite the breath-stealing part, Tim had felt the last of the tension seep out of his shoulders. A tightness had been lifted from his chest. It was like he could finally *breathe* again.

It wasn't until he felt Bruce's hand twitch against his back and he remembered that they were, in fact, still in public that he thought to extract himself from the hug, allowing himself to be led back to the booth with his neck radiating heat.

They'd kept up a nice conversation for a long while, surprisingly keeping the discussed topics pleasant and very much about *Tim*. Bruce had asked him about things he'd never ever thought about discussing with the man, from his interest in photography to computer science to vague inquiries about the medical development of Diana's state.

To say that Tim was getting worried would be an understatement.

There had to be an explanation for Bruce's sudden interest in his personal life, both now and over the phone. Tim knew this dance like the back of his hand, the kind words and ego-stroking compliments concealing quiet favors ready to pounce at the right time.

By now Bruce hadn't said anything in over five minutes, and while Tim was silently relieved to avoid the direct spotlight for a while, he was getting more anxious about what the favor was going to be with every second. He had been fighting the urge to bounce his knee for the better part of a minute, not wanting to show any nervousness that Bruce could zero in on. But by now it was either that or starting to hum to himself, so he started jittering his knee, hoping to free some of the tension building in his chest.

With his own question he wanted to ask Bruce, his own favor waiting to be let free, he felt like he was moments away from exploding.

Tim took another bite out of his burger, sighing wearily out of his nose.

Bruce's fingers were wrapped around the cooling cup of coffee resting on the table, his thumb unconsciously stroking up and down the side. He was probably protecting it from the waitress, and Tim hid a smile behind the burger. He recalled the dumbstruck expression on Bruce's face as he'd watched the waitress snatch up his plate and carry it away, a good portion of the salad still neatly decorating the ceramic. Bruce had turned to Tim, a look of pure shock plastered on his face, and Tim hadn't managed to smother the laugh that had bubbled up his chest. The waiters could not be trusted in this part of town. Especially when ordering a *salad* at a burger joint.

With the memory fresh in his mind, Tim snorted to himself, almost choking on his food in the process. Even though it had been almost inaudible, Bruce's gaze flickered to him, blinking himself out of his trance. He gave him a quick once-over before his eyebrow rose in silent questioning.

Tim swallowed his bite with some difficulty, fighting the blush creeping up his cheeks. "Oh, nothing. Sorry, I, um…" Grasping for something that would explain his blatant staring without mentioning anything about Superman merch or haircuts or, heaven forbid, *what he actually wanted to ask him*, he settled for lamely gesturing to his burger. "I just…thank you for this. It's…really good."

Bruce's gaze flickered to the burger, then up again. "It's a burger."

Tim had, after years of spending time in the public eye and being forced to interact with people across all ages and continents, come to realize that if you spend enough time with a person you can learn to pick up on certain things; social cues, subconscious tics, personalized behavior, et cetera. It was a tool that had been necessary to possess for someone like him, back when words had been the only weapon he could defend himself with.

This meant that by now, Tim had spent well enough time with Bruce to now be aware that almost everything the man said could more often than not be decoded to some extent.

A hidden meaning could lurk behind his carefully chosen words, another question entirely shining in his eyes if you knew when and where and *how* to look for it. The man either thoroughly enjoyed being vague, or he really was completely oblivious to how cryptic he sounded most of the time.

Tim was a firm believer in the latter.

This time, the decryption wasn't hard to crack.

Tim tried very hard not to roll his eyes and was fairly sure that he almost succeeded. "Yes, one that *you* paid for."

Bruce's strange look only grew more prominent. "I'm not going to go bankrupt over a one-course meal."

"No, no, I get that, but-" Tim broke off with a sigh. He settled his burger down on his plate and brushed his hands together over it to get rid of the crumbs sticking to his fingers. Trying to make it seem casual, he shrugged, plucking a few fries from his plate. "Still, it's. You know. Nice of you."

Bruce hummed, and Tim didn't miss the way his lips curved into a subtle smile.

Tim shot him a pleading look, shoulders hunching. "Why can't you just say '*no problem*' or *'you're welcome'* like a normal person?"

"No problem, Timothy."

Tim groaned and tried to keep the smile off his face as he stabbed his fry into the small cup of mayo, gulping it down in one bite. When he caught sight of Bruce's grimace, he snorted.

“What?” he asked, feigning ignorance as he stuffed another mayo-dipped fry into his mouth. “Don’t tell me you don’t like mayo.”

“It’s not something I’ve grown accustomed to, no,” Bruce said. “And don’t talk with your mouth full,” he added, somehow managing to sound both chastising and fond. “You’re worse than Dick.”

Tim felt his smile immediately slide from his face. The temperature of the restaurant seemed to drop, his heart twisting in his chest. He quickly busied himself by picking up the cold glass of coke from the table, trying to keep his expression neutral as he could. His fingers slipped on the condensation that had been created on the outside of the glass, the ice softly knocking together as he took a sip. Feeling too full, the food in his stomach turned to acid.

He couldn’t let one name drop affect him like this. He was an adult, therefore he could handle it like an adult. At least, he *should’ve* been able to. The soda almost spilled over the edge of the glass when he carelessly placed it down on the table. God, he needed to pull himself together. If he wanted to make a good impression and give himself a shot at Bruce accepting his request, the main reason why he was even *here,* he couldn’t be acting like a child.

It was just his luck that Bruce didn’t miss Tim’s change in attitude. Tim sensed the way Bruce paused, felt his gaze burning against his face. He carefully avoided his eyes, praying that he wouldn’t dig further into it. It was only logical that Bruce would always side with Dick. There was no way that he *wouldn’t* pick his first son before anyone else. Before anyone like Tim. But Tim didn’t want to deal with *that* today. Not when the nerves were suddenly making him feel like he was going to throw up.

There was a moment of silence, during which Tim focused on taking deep, grounding breaths. Then Bruce suddenly leaned forward, stealing one of Tim’s fries from his plate.

Immediately jumping on the opportunity to change the topic, Tim glared at him with artificial fury. “*Thief*.”

Bruce bit the fry in half, then shrugged. “You ate my garlic bread.”

“What— you don’t even *like* garlic bread. And don’t—” Tim hastily continued, pointing an accusatory fry at Bruce before he could say anything, “don’t tell me it’s not relevant, because it *is*. I actually *like* fries, and you’re still actively stealing from me.” Tim crossed his arms in front of him before adding, “Also, I *asked*.”

Bruce's lips curved into a small smile. Within the next second, he'd stolen three more fries, raising a taunting eyebrow at Tim as he leaned back.

Tim scowled. "I was wrong. You're not a thief; you're a *menace*."

Bruce's chuckle was quiet but genuine. The crow's feet in the corner of his eyes deepened, and the previously hidden laughter lines curved around his mouth.

Tim couldn't stop his own laugh from bubbling up, from tugging at the corner of his lips. He took a second to marvel at the lack of tension in Bruce's shoulders, at the calm radiating from the man. Tim tried to remember the last time he'd actually *laughed* with Bruce, the last time he'd seen Bruce so…at ease, even before being lost in time.

This was the first time they were actually sitting down together, *alone*, in what felt like *years*. He'd missed this. He'd missed *him*. And the thing was, Tim was done dodging. He didn't want to run anymore.

Now that Bruce was back, Tim wanted – *needed* – to be *near* him. He couldn't stand waking up in a sweat every other night with that familiar ache in his stomach, like he was going to be sick, momentarily convinced that Bruce was still gone. He didn't want to be kept awake for hours on end, wondering if it had all been a dream. That Tim had, just like Dick had said, gone crazy.

It was during those nights that Tim wondered if Bruce was actually resting six feet undergrown in Gotham Cemetery. He'd wonder if all this had been a dream, or worse, just a figment of his imagination. Maybe what he *thought* he'd done with finding and saving Bruce was just the bereavement hallucinations feeding off of his own grief and denial. Maybe none of it was real.

Maybe he was better off admitting himself to Arkham.

So, he wanted – needed – to be close to Bruce. He felt like he'd go insane if he couldn't double-check his reality when needed, or be close to the people he actually cared about.

He missed Alfred so much that it *hurt*. He would also do about anything to avoid returning to his grey, untidy, 200-square-foot apartment ever again. If not him, then his fish deserved way better.

And even if Bruce didn't want Tim around, if he would find it too difficult to handle Tim's ongoing grudge against Dick, Tim *had* to ask.

It would be like ripping off a band-aid, finally sparing him sleepless nights spent contemplating *what if's* and *could be's*.

Whether or not Bruce thought Tim still had a place in Wayne Manor, Tim had to put his cards out on the table and wait for Bruce to make his move.

The problem was that, just like most things in life, this was easier said than done. Tim felt his heart start beating hard in his chest and sweat breaking out on his palms when he so much as thought about ways to start the conversation.

Because moving back to your parent's house at 20 wasn't normal, was it? Jack would've never allowed it to happen. He would've scolded Tim for even *contemplating* it. When you've moved out you've moved out. There's no return. Returning indicates that you're weak, that you've failed. That you're not an adult. Bruce might not even *want* Tim at the manor. He'd probably just take up too much space. There would be yet another mouth to fill and Alfred would have to work even harder, and—

Oh, God, *Alfred.* Tim hadn't even contemplated what his opinion would be. Maybe he should regroup, give Alfred a call when he got home just to make sure—

A loud eruption of laughter from a nearby booth brought Tim out of his thoughts, and he shook himself out of his stupor. He risked a glance at Bruce and noticed that the man was staring into his coffee, his brows once again furrowed, gaze distant.

Tim wondered what he was thinking about. If his thoughts were occupied by the past or the future. The tightness of the corner of Bruce's mouth, and the deepening crease between his eyebrows hinted at it being the former, and Tim swallowed past a sudden lump in his throat.

They sat in silence a few seconds more, Tim carefully planning out the right thing to say with his heart rate steadily ticking up, when the silence was finally broken. But not by Tim.

Bruce, who had been sitting with the coffee raised to his lips for some time, suddenly took a quick sip, lowered the cup to the saucer cleared his throat. His gaze found Tim's and stayed there, pinning him in place. When he spoke, his voice was too casual to sound genuine. "I don't know if you saw it, but I sent you an email last Tuesday."

Tim felt his entire body go rigid. The glass nearly slipped out of his grip and he quickly lowered it onto the table, his heart now pounding for a different reason entirely.

“Oh, um, okay," he said, trying to sound curious. "What was it about?”

Please don’t be about what I think it is. For the love of everything, don’t let it be about that.

Bruce’s gaze raked over Tim’s features as if searching for something. Then he sighed, intertwining his fingers and resting them on the table. “Gotham Academy. Their application deadline is in a few weeks.”

Tim went all cold, ice settling deep in his chest. He repressed the urge to scream.

Of course, Tim had seen it. The email had landed in his inbox five days ago. The words *Gotham Academy Boarding School* and *apply* felt like they’d been burned into his cornea, flashing before him every time he blinked.

This time Tim’s increasing heartbeats were like warning drums, apprising him of what was about to happen. “Yeah, I…I saw it,” Tim said, trying to keep his voice even. He plucked a fry from his plate and began pushing other fries around with it, hoping Bruce would catch on and drop it.

Please, drop it.

No such luck. When Bruce realized Tim wasn't planning on continuing, he leaned forward with his arms on the table, fingers still intertwined eyes still searching. “Okay. And what do you think?”

His words were picked with care, his voice light and carefully devoid of any strong emotion, as if thinking Tim didn’t already know what Bruce wanted him to say.

But of course, Tim knew. He knew what *everyone* wanted him to say. After all, he’d already had this conversation with Dick countless of times before.

Upon haring Tim dropped out all those months ago, Dick had been *livid*. Tim had lost count of the number of evenings he’d spent hearing about the consequences of dropping out of high school, how giving up his position at G.A. was like flushing his future straight down the toilet.

But Tim had just gotten his first lead, had even managed to scrape together solid *proof* that Bruce was still out there. He hadn't even hesitated before contacting principal Hudgens, before announcing his immediate departure. Nothing and no one could've stopped him.

And he'd done it. He'd proved everyone wrong and he'd *found* Bruce. He'd brought him back home.

And now, even thinking about returning to the same halls he'd been in when Bruce had been dead?

It made Tim's heart *ache*.

Sighing sharply through his nose, Tim threw the fries back onto his plate, trying to reign in the emotions that threatened to break free as he leaned back, crossing his arms over his chest. Bruce was still watching him, silently taking in Tim's struggles with a concerned crease between his eyebrows. When the silence stretched on, mostly because Tim was waiting to answer until he was sure his voice wouldn't tremble, the crease deepened.

"We don't have to talk about this if you don't want to," he said gently, and Tim almost scoffed.

Of course, I don't want to talk about this, Tim thought. *That's exactly why I* haven't been *talking about it*.

"I just wanted to hear your thoughts."

A revelation crossed Tim's mind and anger bubbled up so suddenly that Tim didn't couldn't even try to hide it. "Is that why you wanted to meet me here?" he said, eyes boring into Bruce's. "You didn't—all you wanted to do was to discuss GA?"

At Tim's sharp words, Bruce shifted back and briefly showed his palms, looking confused. "No, that's— I wanted to see you."

"That's real convenient," Tim muttered, curling in on himself. "Two birds with one stone, right?"

Something flashed past Bruce's eyes, something sharp. He stayed quiet long enough to make Tim squirm. "Tim, I spoke with Jason the other day," he finally settled on, and Tim froze. Still with an air of concern, he continued. "He told me that you were thinking of going back."

Tim was going to steal one of Jason's guns and *shoot* him. He clenched

his jaw, arms tightening across his chest. “And is Jason the only one you talk about me to behind my back or are you starting a club?” His voice was biting, but he didn't care anymore.

Bruce’s eyebrows twitched again, but he didn’t look angry. He just looked…lost. “Tim, I— I didn’t mean to upset you. I’m just trying to understand. To help you.”

Help him. Yeah right. Dick had thought he’d been helping when he’d taken Robin from him. He thought he'd been helping when he tried forcing Tim back to an environment that threatened to send him spiraling into a panic attack.

Tim was aware of the fact that the sooner he said something, the sooner Bruce could go off on his rant about his future and responsibility and what it means to be an adult, and the sooner this would all be over. The sooner he could *leave*. So he took a sharp breath, steeled himself, and talked.

“Okay, fine. Here’s what I *think*. I *think* I need more time to *think* about it—” He hated how defensive he was sounding, how he felt more and more like a child talking back to a grown-up. But it was too late to stop now. “— because I can’t just go back and pretend that I’m —that everything is fine and that it’s all cool and that I can continue where I left off as if *nothing happened*. I’m not ready—” He broke off, his voice nearly breaking. He sucked in a breath, clenched his jaw, and looked Bruce square in the eye. “I’m just not ready to go back. Not yet.”

Despite there being sounds all around them – the sizzling from the kitchen, the quiet murmur of the customers, the rain splattering against the window – the silence that settled between them was almost deafening. Bruce’s eyes raked over Tim’s face, his brows pulled together in a deep frown. Tim felt like he was being dissected, the intensity of Bruce’s gaze forcing him to duck his head again. He found a sudden interest in tracing the edge of the table with his thumb.

He tried to prepare himself for the approaching argument. Tried to hide his disappointment, to keep his breaths even. Bruce wasn’t going to let this slide, that was obvious. And Tim was too *tired* to care anymore.

“Okay.”

Tim flinched, his eyes snapping up to Bruce. “I— What?”

Bruce calmly met Tim's gaze, and there was something new in his eyes. He almost looked…sad. "Okay."

"Oh. Uh, I…" Tim cleared his throat, his mind reeling. "That's…"

A couple huddled beneath an umbrella walked past the window. Their shadows drifted across Bruce's face.

Bruce sighed. He sounded tired. "Tim, all I want is for you to be happy. I'm not going to force you into doing something you don't want or are ready to do. Besides, you're an adult now." Bruce's smile turned into something softer, the sadness in his eyes smoothing over into something fond, almost *proud*. "You get to make your own choices. And if you feel like you'll be happier doing what you do now, then I won't stand in the way. I trust you'll make a decision with your best interest at heart."

"That's." Tim inhaled sharply and coughed, trying to dislodge the lump that had started growing in his throat. "I—cool. That's…okay, cool."

"Cool," said Bruce, the small smile still present on his face, and oh lord was he *teasing* him?

Tim ducked his head, fighting the blush creeping up his cheeks. "Shut up."

Bruce chuckled softly. Then he stilled. Tim glanced up just in time to see the smile slip from his face.

"Just—" Bruce hesitated briefly, tapping his finger on the table in a way that to Bruce's standards could almost count as fidgeting. "I know you don't like to talk about this, but I want— I *need* you to know that if you want to talk, about *anything,* you can always come to me. Always."

Tim stared at him. "Oh," was all he could say. His head spun at the surge of emotions that threatened to spill over, his throat starting to close up. A warmth he hadn't realized he'd been missing ignited in his chest. To his horror, he realized his eyes had started to burn.

But there was something that was making the weight on his chest even heavier than before. Something that felt an awful lot like *guilt*.

"What if…" he began, then snapped his mouth shut, eyes widening in horror. He'd almost— no, he couldn't ask that, what kind of asshole

would even *think* to—

Bruce frowned, and Tim was painfully reminded that he was sitting across one of the world's greatest detectives, self-proclaimed as he might be, when he saw eyes clear in understanding as the puzzle pieces fell into place. "What if you don't want to?" Bruce asked gently, and Tim's breath hitched, hating how *wrong* that sounded.

"I'm sorry, I didn't mean to—" Tim cut himself off, shoulders hunching. But then Bruce confused Tim with another pained smile, and Tim's forming words dissolved into nothing.

"Tim, I'm never going to *force* you into talking to me. I only want you to know that I'm here for you. Whenever you feel like it. Even if it's never."

This had to be a dream, right? There was no way this was *really* happening. That *Bruce* was saying this. This was…more than Tim had ever wanted, more than he ever could've asked for.

"It's…it's just—" Tim paused, skin itching with discomfort at the mere thought of *discussing* this with Bruce. Bruce was still leaning forward over the table. His concerned frown was once again on full display, and Tim felt like he couldn't keep his eyes on him for longer than two seconds at a time. God, this was not the direction he'd thought this conversation would be going. The back of his neck burned as he continued. "I think…I think I do. Want to, you know, like. *Talk*. But I'm not *used* to…I mean, I don't, um. I don't…do that? You know? I mean, I never—"

God, he wasn't making any sense. He sounded like an *idiot*. What was he even trying to say?

"Hey." Suddenly Bruce's warm hand was on Tim's arm, squeezing gently, and Tim felt his shoulders sag. "You're okay, take a breath."

Tim immediately sucked in a breath through his nose and exhaled out of his mouth, his heart pitter-pattering inside his chest.

Someone in the back of the restaurant dropped their cutlery on the floor. A series of orders were shouted to the chef in the kitchen. A group of women behind Tim began quietly singing *Happy Birthday* to one of their members. They sounded happy.

Bruce gently stroked his thumb across the fabric of Tim's hoodie, his mouth twisted in a sad curve, the creases between his eyebrows once

again present. He waited until Tim's breathing had evened out. Then he squeezed Tim's forearm again. "Tim, I need you to listen to me."

Tim hesitated for a solid few seconds before he forced himself to meet Bruce's gaze. A flutter of anxiety danced through his stomach when he saw the sudden seriousness shining in the man's eyes.

Bruce looked at Tim for a moment. Then he took a deep breath, his thumb stilling on Tim's forearm. "First of all; it's perfectly normal to feel uncomfortable when opening up to someone. Expressing your feelings and being vulnerable can be hard. Especially if you don't do it often." Bruce paused and offered a wry smile. "Take it from someone who knows."

Tim swallowed past the dryness in his mouth. He willed his hands to stop shaking. Prayed that Bruce wouldn't notice.

But Bruce wasn't looking at his hands. His attention was affixed to Tim's face, his smile disappearing as the gentle frown returned. "But it's also important to be aware of who you can turn to should you need someone to listen. It's important to know that you're not alone. Because you *aren't*."

Tim blinked at him, shoulders hunching. His skin was crawling, the nagging feeling returning, and he didn't understand why until he wondered if this wasn't a bit too on the nose. Wasn't this what everyone was being told these days? Pounded into everyone's brains by teachers and friends and strangers alike. Didn't Tim already know this? It felt like he did.

But.

A part of Tim wondered if he'd ever actually *believed* it; when Mom had told him she would always be there for him; when Dick had offered him an ear to listen; when Jason had looked at him funny a few weeks back and asked him if he needed something.

Before, Tim had interpreted the words as empty promises, as something people just *said*. Things that made them feel better about themselves. *Now*, as Bruce repeated the same words with such overwhelming sincerity and understanding and *love*, Tim kinda felt like he couldn't really breathe right. Because now he was actually forced to listen to the words.

Bruce was talking again, and Tim forced himself to tune in to the conversation, his head spinning.

“I don’t know what you went through when I was gone, but, Tim,” Bruce paused again, seemingly choosing his words carefully, as if he was afraid Tim would get up and walk out the door if he said the wrong thing. “I…I want to help. I— it hurts my heart seeing you under this…this *weight*. And I’m not saying this because I think you’re feeble or lacking or any of the sorts. I’m saying this because I care about you.”

“It’s not that bad,” Tim said, trying to put an end to Bruce's talking, his voice thick. Then immediately clicked his mouth shut when he realized that he’d just incriminated himself.

Bruce’s eyebrows went through a range of movements, his mouth twitching as if he was in pain. He looked like he wanted to say something, but didn’t know where to start. “Even if it isn’t,” Bruce finally said quietly, his hand warm against Tim’s forearm, “I want you to know that…that I’m here.” Cold air rushed to Tim’s forearm when Bruce then lifted his hands slightly off the table, palms facing Tim. “And again, I don’t *expect* you to talk to me. All I ask of you is to expect whatever is gnawing at you to disappear. It doesn’t do well in the long run." He smiled, softly but self-deprecatingly. "Trust me.”

Again, the complete and utter honesty and *understanding* present in Bruce’s eyes were enough to steal the air from Tim’s lungs. He didn’t know how to handle the sudden onslaught of *appreciation* for the man before him, how much he wanted to both keep him talking forever and make him shut up *right this instant*. He didn’t know what he was supposed to do under this level of scrutiny, found he couldn’t look directly at Bruce anymore, instead keeping his eyes trained on a piece of thread that poked out of the fuzzy material of Bruce’s collar.

“And if you ever *do* want to talk,” Bruce was saying, hand once again returning to Tim’s arm, “no matter what you say or what you’ve done, I will always love you. No matter what.”

“Even if I kill someone?” Tim said with a trembling voice.

It had meant to be a joke. An attempt to ease the pressure that was pressing down on him from all sides. It wasn’t until Bruce *flinched*, until Tim felt the way the grip around his arm tightened that he realized that he’d royally fucked up.

Widened eyes snapped to Bruce, and he all but reeled back, the backrest pressing against his back. “Oh man, I’m so sorry, that was…” words failed him as he desperately tried to backtrack. He pressed his

lips shut and looked away, his neck burning. “Wow, that was super insensitive.”

Bruce was quiet for a bit. Then he cleared his throat. “Yes,” he said quietly, and Tim shrunk in on himself, wishing the ground would just swallow him whole.

“Even then.”

Tim was startled into raising his gaze.

Bruce was looking out onto the street again, his eyes a dusty grey in the pale light. A harsh breeze blew rain against the window, causing the small awning that stretched out over the outside of the window to flutter. The shadows of raindrops pitter-patting against and sliding down the window danced across Bruce's face when he turned to Tim.

“Even then,” he repeated, and even though he looked so, *so* sad that made Tim want to go against the part of him that recoiled from any form of touch and *hug* him, there was something else in his eyes. A warmth that Tim didn’t know how to handle. Especially when it seemed like it was aimed at *him*.

Bruce looked at him, waiting. Then he sighed. He removed his hand from Tim’s arm to push his hair out of his eyes and leaned back. Tim tried to pretend that he didn’t shudder under the sudden cold. “But I sincerely hope that never happens. If only for your own sake.”

“Yeah, I…me too,” Tim stuttered, wincing at how stupid he sounded. He already knew he wouldn’t be getting any sleep tonight, that he would instead be breaking down their conversation on a cellular level until the sun rose and he had to head to work. That he would have to remind himself that it hadn’t been some fucked-up dream, that it had actually happened.

“Woah,” he breathed, then cleared his throat when he realized he’d said it out loud, and Bruce looked over at him. “Um. Since when did you get so…gushy?”

That pained expression returned, the blue of Bruce’s eyes going strangely achromatic. He looked down at his intertwined fingers, tapping his forefinger against his knuckles once, twice, thrice. “Since I realized what I’d almost lost. What I’d taken for granted for so long.”

Oh. Oh no. This was not…this was not how their banter usually went. This was too honest, too *raw*. Tim wasn’t ready for this. Was he?

Yeah, no, he needed to back away from that conversation.

“Oh,” he settled on. He picked up one of the French fries and began awkwardly nibbling on it. This time, Bruce seemed to decide to take the hint, or pity on him, and Tim’s shoulder’s sagged in relief when he picked up his coffee again, his gaze turning to the window.

Tim ate the food with care. Even though he was still hungry – his half-eaten burger lay abandoned on his plate – he was using it more as a way to distract him from the way his chest felt both ten times lighter and heavier than it had a few minutes earlier. A part of him wanted to slide out of the booth and make a run for it. Another part of him wanted Bruce to pull him into a hug.

Then he froze, and the moment was cut short when he suddenly recalled the reason he’d agreed to this meeting to begin with. When it dawned on him that he wasn’t out of the woods just yet.

Tim slowly put the half-eaten fry on the plate, his stomach twisting as nervousness struck him again. He dared a glance at Bruce. The man was once again gazing out the window, his shoulders having dropped further down as if their conversation had relieved them of the previous tension.

Tim worried on his lip, fiddling with the edge of the table.

Okay. How to begin?

“Uh, Bruce?”

Oh wow. *Great* start, Tim.

Bruce turned to him, and Tim’s face must’ve been an open book; within a second the small smile had slipped away as he sat up straighter in his seat, his eyes taking on a new alertness.

Tim dug his nail into the table, gaze flickering between Bruce’s face and his shoulder nervously. *Why was this so damn difficult?*

“I have something to…to ask you.”

And it was *Bruce’s* eyes, *Bruce’s* slightly concerned frown that he was met with, his encouraging nod that urged him to continue. Not Jack’s.

Tim took a breath, steeling himself.

Not Jack, not Jack, not Jack—

“I was just wondering if I could maybe stay at the Manor for a bit?”

The moment the words were out, Tim wished he could stuff them back in. His heart pounded so forcefully he could feel it in his stomach, and Tim was sure that even Bruce would be able to hear it in the silence that followed. Because Bruce wasn’t *saying anything.*

Tim knew that Bruce had a tendency to freeze when he was surprised. Not in the sense that he became completely immobile – that would’ve been highly impractical when one’s job literally included *dodging bullets* – but his face would become as blank as a marble statue, his expression turning into something that was practically unreadable to the untrained eye.

Much like what was happening now.

And unfortunately, this was a puzzle Tim had yet to crack. He couldn't even begin to understand what was happening behind those guarded eyes. However, if only for a second, just as Tim had asked his question, something had happened. A rare flash of raw emotion in the blue of Bruce’s eyes had appeared, gone so quickly Tim thought he'd imagined it. And a part of Tim didn’t want to figure out what it could've been, already too busy battling the fact that he'd made a huge mistake.

Maybe Bruce’s words had been just that; *words,* empty and uttered to make the guilt of being absent for a little over half a year a little easier to bear. And now Tim had ruined it.

He doesn’t want you back, a voice whispered in the back of Tim’s head. *Once you leave the nest there’s no turning back.*

Desperate to fill the silence, Tim cleared his throat. “I’m not in trouble or anything, don’t worry, I just thought it would be…nice? I-I mean, only if that’s alright with you. And the others, of course; Damian and…you know.” Tim paused again and hastily continued, feeling his throat beginning to tighten as the silence stretched on. “But I understand that it’s an inconvenience and that you’re busy, and, you know what, just forget I said—"

“It’s not an inconvenience.”

Tim couldn’t quite suppress the flinch as he was brought out of his rambling, his mouth clicking shut. Bruce’s voice had been just on the edge of chastising, his brow suddenly furrowing. He looked…angry. Or, no, more *troubled* than anything. It didn’t do anything to soothe

the way Tim's heart was hammering against his throat.

Bruce's words registered in Tim's brain at an alarmingly slow rate.

"Oh. Okay, um." Tim swallowed past the dryness in his mouth, his gaze flickering off of Bruce's face to his shoulder, still unable to meet Bruce's gaze. His heart was beating so hard he was sure Bruce could hear it from across the table. "So…is it, you know, okay with you, or…?"

"Tim, I…you—" Bruce abruptly cut himself off, adverting his gaze to glance outside. Tim watched his jaw work, the muscles tensing and relaxing, his eyes darting around as he searched for the right words. Tim's heartbeat was starting to slow down, and humiliation surged up inside him when he realized his hands were shaking. He quickly hid them out of view under the table, purposefully taking a deep, calming breath.

When Bruce turned back to Tim again, a pained grimace was cracking through his façade, and when he spoke his voice was so soft it sounded close to breaking. "Tim, you don't have to ask for *permission* to stay at the Manor. It's…it's *your home*."

And that was when Tim realized that the unidentified expression in Bruce's eyes hadn't been anger or even disappointment – it was complete and utter *bewilderment*. As if he didn't understand why they were even having this conversation. Why he had to *explain* this to him *at all*.

Tim blinked, and Bruce stared back, his face a shade paler than it'd been before. He looked…ill. Still staring at Tim like he's told him he was *dying*.

"Oh…um, okay," Tim croaked, but then he saw the crestfallen look on Bruce's face and quickly continued. "I mean, okay as in, like, *cool*, not okay as in..." he cleared his throat awkwardly, scraping nervously on the edge of the table with the nail of his thumb. His heart was still beating out of his chest, his brain struggling to try and keep up with what was happening as he tried to make his mouth work.

"Tim—"

"I, uh, I have to get back to my apartment," Tim interjected, unwilling to let Bruce talk, the strain in the man's voice making his skin crawl. "Not right now but, like, soon. Just to get some work done. So I was thinking of maybe coming by tomorrow? If that's alright with you of

course.”

This time, Bruce didn’t answer verbally, only gave a shaky nod. His eyebrows were still pinched, his lips pressed tightly together, and he—was he about to *cry?*

Panicking, Tim ignored his own thickening throat and pressed on, his eyes drawn to his thumb currently sawing an indent into the table. “I have to head back to my apartment after work to grab my sh— uh, *stuff* and feed the fish and…yeah. I’ll probably be by the Manor after seven. And that’s if the trains don’t run late so you should probably start dinner without—”

“Tim.”

Tim’s gaze flinched up, and with a surge of horror caught a brief glance of Bruce’s eyes; brighter than before, shining wetly in the pale light streaming in through the window. Then Bruce looked away, his eyebrows furrowing as if he was in pain. Closing his eyes, he sighed. Tim wondered if he’d imagined the barely audible *”christ, kiddo,”* uttered under his breath.

A moment later, Bruce cleared his throat, all clear-eyes and business-like as he turned back to Tim. As if Tim hadn’t almost made him *cry* half a second ago. “You usually get off work at five, right?” At Tim’s timid nod, Bruce nodded right back, looking like he’d just settled a deal. “I’ll be at your apartment at five-thirty.”

For what felt like the millionth time in the span of a minute, Tim found himself at a loss for words. Still, he managed to keep the tears threatening to spill over his cheeks at bay and give Bruce a shaky nod. He couldn’t quite make himself meet Bruce’s gaze as spoke. “Yeah, that’s fine, that’s…that would be cool.”

“…cool.”

Something warm was blooming in Tim’s chest, and he couldn’t stop the smile that tugged on his lips. The sounds from the restaurant seemed to dim as silence once again settled between them. Tim didn’t know whether he wanted to crawl out of his skin or laugh until his stomach ached. Maybe both.

He felt lighter than he had in months.

Bruce finally took pity on him and leaned forward, nudging Tim’s plate closer to him. “Eat up.”

Tim obeyed, picking up a fry and tentatively started nibbling on it. Then he nodded down at his plate. “You can have some fries if you want to.”

Bruce huffed out a laugh but did as he was told, leaning forward and plucking up two measly fries. "Just don't tell Alfred. He’ll never let me live this down."

The rain was still tapping against the window, however the intensity of which was starting to diminish. Tim spotted the patches of blue peeking through the thinning clouds and came to a decision.

“How would you do it?” he murmured before he could chicken out.

Bruce cocked his head slightly, listening. “Do what?”

Tim brushed some invisible crumbs off the table. He wouldn’t allow himself to back up now. “You know. Find someone who could… listen.”

Bruce was quiet for a while, long enough to make Tim glance up at him. He was met with a look of uncertainty, of a man unsure what the right path forward was. “I could,” he said, then paused. He did a weird thing with his mouth as if hesitating, then shifted in his seat and cleared his throat. “I could talk to my therapist. See if she has some contacts.”

Tim blinked up at Bruce, his knee that he hadn't realized he was bouncing coming to a halt. “You—you go to therapy?”

Bruce smiled at him then, a careful, almost self-conscious thing. “Occasionally.”

And Tim realized within the span of a heartbeat that his dad was braver in ways he’d never grasped. His chest swelled, but he refused to look away.

“That, um. Yeah. I would like that.”

Bruce’s fraction of a smile shifted into something more genuine, and Tim followed suit.

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They left the restaurant only a few minutes later. Even though it was a Sunday, Bruce had business to attend to, and Tim had a suitcase to

pack. They headed over to the coat rack by the small entrance, and as Tim pulled on his coat he glanced outside to find that it had stopped raining completely. Then his face scrunched up into an embarrassed grimace when Bruce draped his scarf over his shoulders.

”It’s not even that cold,” Tim complained, trying to slink out of Bruce’s reach, but Bruce’s stern look stopped him in his tracks.

”You’ll get sick,” was all Bruce said, tapping Tim on the chin to make him lean his head back. With no option but to comply, Tim tried to keep scowling as Bruce began wrapping the scarf a tad too tightly around his neck. It was hard to ignore the warmth spreading through his chest, the realization that his eyes were beginning to burn. When he was finished, Bruce’s hand gently tapped Tim’s arm, and Tim quickly turned, not missing the way Bruce’s smile had faded once he caught sight of Tim’s expression.

They went out into the soft drizzle, the bell attached to the door bidding them farewell. Bruce’s cane clinked in tandem with his steps as they headed down the pavement. The sun was shining through the misty clouds, and the wind carried with it the early promises of winter. It was shaping up to be a rarely beautiful afternoon.

”I’ll hail you a cab a bit further along the road,” Bruce said, sounding as if he was mostly talking to himself. “It’s a bit too busy here.”

As if proving his point, they were met by a swarm of people. Tim almost jumped when Bruce immediately placed a guiding hand on Tim’s back, keeping him from being lost in the steam. When they’d passed through to the other side, instead of removing his hand like Tim had anticipated, he felt it slide along his back and allocate on Tim’s shoulder. After a while, the pressure gradually increased, as if Bruce had thought Tim was going to shake him off.

Ducking his head, Tim kept his pace deliberately slow, telling himself it was only to spare Bruce any more pain as he limped forward, leaning heavily on his cane. No other reason. Definitely not the warmth that engulfed him when he subtly pressed himself closer to Bruce’s side, when the arm tightened around him in return.

It felt like no time had passed when Bruce suddenly stopped walking entirely. The warmth around Tim’s shoulders disappeared, and he glanced up in time to see Bruce raising his arm, attracting the attention of an incoming cab that immediately swerved across two lanes to get to the side of the pavement.

Then Tim's vision was blocked by a black coat as Bruce without hesitation turned to him and pulled him into another bone-crushing hug.

"Call me when you get there, okay?" he said, his chest rumbling against Tim's ear.

Tim nodded mutely, his cheek scraping against the soft wool. Didn't trust his voice to speak, didn't trust his mouth with what words would actually tumble out if he were to open it.

He was once again the one who decided when the hug would end, the second time he was able – or felt like he was *allowed* – to do so. It made it harder to leave, but eventually, he managed to release his grip on Bruce's jacket and take a step back.

Avoiding Bruce's gaze and with his eyes stinging, he stepped down from the curb and opened the door of the taxi that had been waiting beside them.

"Tim?"

Tim turned around, resting his hand on the top of the car door.

Bruce was standing where Tim had left him, one hand propped on the cane, the other one hanging by his side. He looked like he was mulling something over, his mouth pressed into a thin line, empty hand clenching and unclenching.

"What you said before, I just—"

He changed his grip on the cane as he frowned, leaning further on it, but it didn't seem like he was in pain. More like he was trying to restlessly shift his weight but his stiff leg wasn't allowing it.

"It's never an inconvenience," Bruce then said, and Tim's eyes went wide.

Bruce paused, suddenly looking more serious than Tim had ever seen before. And there was a frustration, or even *desperation* to his voice, an aching need for Tim to understand what he was trying to say when he quickly added, "*You're* never an inconvenience. Don't think that for a second."

Tim couldn't move. His throat thickened, his already stinging eyes beginning to burn. Bruce's eyes bore straight into his *soul*, unrelenting

and unwavering.

“Never.”

And something snapped within Tim. A dam that he realized had been built for the sole purpose of keeping in the worry and *what if’s* and *doubt* cracked and broke, allowing pure *relief* to wash over him.

Bruce’s eyes widened. A hand reached out.

“Tim—"

Tim *fell* forward. His arms latched around Bruce’s middle, hands grabbing the fabric on Bruce’s back, holding on for dear life as he pressed his face into his chest.

He felt Bruce go rigid only momentarily before there was a clatter of wood meeting stone and strong, warm arms - *two* of them, Tim realized - engulfed him. Tim’s eyes burned and his breath hitched involuntarily, sounding too wet and guttural to be anything other than what it was.

Bruce’s arms tightened even further. A hand cupped the back of Tim’s head.

“Oh, Tim. It’s okay. You’re okay.”

Tim turned his head to the side, breathing in the crisp fall air, feeling Bruce’s wool coat dampen under his cheek.

He was finally home.

End Notes

I love them your honor

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